

By way of exception, the Sunday liturgy we would ordinarily celebrate today is being replaced by the feast of the dedication of a church, the Lateran Basilica in Rome. Built originally in the early 4th century, it became the cathedral church of the pope and, in some sense, the mother church of Western Christianity. In celebrating it, we are invited to celebrate all our churches and with them the spiritual reality of the church as a community of faith.

In the New Testament, the word church refers both to the whole community of believers and to local gatherings of its members whether in Jerusalem or Antioch, Rome or Ephesus. The Greek word we translate as church suggests an assembling, a coming together of people in response to a call, in this case, in response to the call of the gospel.

When Christians began to set aside buildings for their gatherings, they called them the house of the church and eventually simply church.

Over the centuries, churches have taken many shapes and forms, from small, modest buildings to magnificent Basilicas and Cathedrals, to buildings that in some cases have come to be included among the wonders of world architecture. Churches tend both to reflect the communities they serve and to

reveal something of the broader state of religion in the period in which they are built.

Today's first reading is part of a longer passage in which the prophet Ezekiel describes his vision of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. He lived at the time of the Babylonian exile, a time that began with the destruction of the Holy City and its temple. It is hard for us to imagine what that event meant for those who experienced it people. The temple in Jerusalem was not only the one place in which sacrificial rituals were to be performed; it was there too that God was thought to be present among his people in a special way.

Ezekiel predicts a return to Jerusalem and a renewal of its religious life. He sees water flowing from the east side of the temple, water that becomes a stream and eventually a great river on whose banks trees of every kind flourish, trees the fruit of which "will be for food and their leaves for healing." When it reaches the Dead Sea, its waters become fresh; in them fish of various kinds abound.

Ezekiel's vision is of the spiritual power of the temple. From it will flow a life and energy that will transform the whole people.

Today's gospel contains John's account of the so-called cleansing of the temple by Jesus. In an act of holy anger he drives out from it those who are selling

sheep and cattle as well as the money changers seated at their tables. The gesture is a prophetic one. It is about the reform and renewal of religious life at every level. In John's telling, however, it is even more. When challenged by people to justify what he is doing, Jesus says: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." As his listeners wonder how such a thing might be possible, the evangelist explains to us that he "was speaking of the temple of his body."

On the basis of this incident and others, believers came to see Jesus as replacing the Jerusalem temple as well as every other form and focus of worship. He himself is the privileged place of encounter with God. His life and above all the self-giving love that brought him to the cross, constitute the perfect sacrifice. He is priest, sacrifice and temple all in one.

In today's second reading Paul is addressing the Christian community in Corinth. He could just as well be talking to us. "Brothers and sisters," he says, "you are God's building." It is a building the foundation of which is Jesus Christ. Going somewhat further Paul says that the building is in fact a temple, God's temple, a temple into which we, as living stones, are being built up by God's Spirit who dwells in our hearts.

The message of the readings is clear: the church is not primarily a building or an institution but rather people, people who believe and hope in Christ and who are united with him and with one another through the bond of the Spirit.

If this is what church primarily is, the buildings in which we gather deserve in their own way to be called churches. They provide a space in which we can come together, pray, and celebrate the eucharist and the other sacraments. Most churches are more than simple gathering places. They are distinctive in form and furnishings and in the atmosphere that marks them. In most cases they make it easier for us to become aware of the presence of God in our midst and to enter in faith and love into the liturgy.

Churches can be symbols and sacraments to the world as well as to us of spiritual realities, of God and Christ and the Spirit-inspired life to which we are called. As such we should be grateful for, and cherish them, and ensure that they will be there for those who come after us.